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The Heroic Ethos of Russian and Georgian Folk Poetry

DONALD RAYFIELD

THE analogies between Russian and Georgian folk poetry invite more thorough investigation than they have yet received;¹ this paper is intended as a reconnoitring excursion into a rich and poorly explored territory. Two folk cultures which have had only slight intermittent contact until the end of the seventeenth century (limiting the possibility of influence) and which are far apart in origin and language (thus limiting common sources) can be usefully compared largely because of accidents of history and because of aspects, perhaps universals, of the heroic ethos. Folk transmission, by seepage, cannot be ruled out, for Georgian language and culture show evidence of prolonged contact with Indo-European as well as the autochthonous Caucasian and Anatolian cultures. The Daryal pass, too, for millenia has let more than amber and sheep move from north to south.

This paper will concentrate on the heroic ideal, rather than the heroic genre, for the classification of genres has followed very different lines, and for good reasons, in Russian and Georgian folk poetry. In Russian, the *byliny* for instance, form not only a sharply defined genre but a canon, outside which we recognize the *istoricheskaya pesnya* (historical song) relating to identifiable historical episodes, the *ballada*, which frequently relates the adventures, sometimes the death, of a usually anonymous hero; lastly, certain lyrical genres, in particular the *plach* (lament or dirge) can sometimes be classified as heroic. Although there is some overlap (the epithets and ethos of the *bylina* can be found in the *ballada*), each genre has its characteristic narrative structure, vocabulary and rhythm. In Georgian, the case is different. What the reciter (*mtkveli*) simply calls a *sagmiro leksi* (heroic poem) may range from a four-line aphorism, a wry reflection on the vicissitudes of war, to an account of several hundred lines of the hero and his *mziri* (= *druzhina*, war-band) and their often fatal end. Such longer poems have the characteristics of a

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¹ V. I. K'ot'et'išvili, *xalxuri p'oezia*, Tbilisi, 1961 (hereafter K.) makes some points in his appended *eks'kursebi*, from which a small bibliography can be gleaned.

lay; they are narrated elliptically, laconically and give the impression (perhaps unwarranted) of being the detritus of an extended cycle. But no clear-cut boundaries separate the *sagmiro leksi* from the *samgloviaro leksi* (the mourning poem), in which the hero, as though from Elysium or at the moment of death, recounts his death. The *sagmiro leksi*, too, is often narrated in the first person, occasionally in the second, but also in the third. The same poem may switch from one person to another. It is not easy to distinguish narrative or lyrical recital on the one hand and choral, ritual, semi-dramatic texts such as the *xmit nat'irali* (loud weeping), for both heroic poetry and communal laments are often sung by chorus alternating with soloists. Georgian heroic poetry, lyrical or not, tends to the lament: the death of the hero, whether at the end or at the beginning of the poem, is its centre of gravity. The fact that the *mtkmeli* is very often a woman is also relevant. The role of woman among the Pshavi, Khevsuri and Tushi — the mountain tribes that have best preserved their oral culture — is to be both a custodian of oral poetry and a mourner of her untimely dead kinsmen: hence the confusion of heroic commemoration with lament.²

Many distinguished collectors and commentators of Georgian heroic poetry, such as K'ot'et'išvili, have used terminology of Russian origin, e.g. *ballada*, to classify their collections, but with few convincing criteria. The monumental *kartuli xalxuri p'oezia*, now in its sixth volume, classifies folk poems first of all by their subject matter — e.g. the death of the hero in battle, the death of the hero in a hunting adventure, the panegyric of the hero, the heroic ideal; secondly by the folk poet's stance — heroic mourning, loud weeping; thirdly, by the communal significance of the poem — whether it has a particular calendar association or not, whether it is choral or solo. But few of these distinctions belong to the reciters themselves. Among the Pshavi and Khevsuri, everyday life was so full of ritual that the distinction between ritual and non-ritual is shadowy. The only classification commonly found is the terms *samgloviaro* (mourning) and *mosagonari* (commemorative) as particular subdivisions of heroic poetry. Professional classifiers often place the same poem heard under different circumstances under different sections.

The important fact is that the same ethos, the same gravitation towards the hero's death, the same eight-syllable line, the same discrete narration, similar incidents, imagery and vocabulary characterize all Georgian heroic poetry. The hero has a constant quality: he is conscious of the necessity and the enormity of his own

² For a discussion of the links between the heroic and the mourning poem, see K. Sixaruliṣe, 'xalxur p'oet'ur žanrta genet'ik'uri k'avširi' in *kartuli polk'lori*, vols 1-11, Tbilisi, 1964.

death, whether he is dying or returning victorious. Even at his most excited moments, he is never far from the laconic solemnity of the fatalist. The boasting of the Russian *bogatyř* or Scandinavian hero is an assertion of indomitable strength, very far from fatalism. The Khevsuri hero calls out to his enemy:

tu dagcda, aptaraulo,
didxans cocxalimc xario!
tu mogxvda čemi nasroli,
čemi uncrosimc xario!³

A hero as philosophical as this needs no transmogrification in order to become the subject and narrator of a lament.

I

While the *bylina* and *sagmiro leksi* owe as much to mythology and legend as to history, certain historical coincidences should be noted. Firstly, in both Russian and Georgian cultures, Christianity overlays, rather than supplants a system of pagan beliefs: it provides symbols, oaths, a calendar, a terminology and, above all, a national identity by which to distinguish friend and foe. But Christian ethics or a Christian conception of the after-life are elusive in the heroic poetry of either culture. True, the remnants of pagan belief are so fragmentary in the *byliny* as to be virtually obliterated, while in the mythological and heroic poems of the Pshavi, Khevsuri and Tushi the pagan gods, spirits and shrines live on intact in the flimsiest of disguises. The *bogatyř* has supernatural strength and magical weapons and steed, but his outlook and actions take no heed of any but this material world. The Georgian hero never forgets his semi-divine predecessors who fought demons as he now fights the enemy; he is always aware, as we shall see, of the after-life and his kinsmen in the underworld; if he has supernatural powers at his disposal, then he attributes them to the shrine (*xat'i*), the rudimentary dry-stone *salocavi* (place of prayer), where his village comes to commemorate the dead and propitiate the gods, and whose vassal the hero considers himself. Only its powers can render the hero *davlatiani* (favoured by fate). One might argue that the much stronger pagan faith of Georgian heroic poetry aligns it more closely to the Christianity it apparently defends than the *bylina* can ever approach.

Secondly, we see explicitly in Georgian and vestigially in Russian poetry a loose, often internecine confederation periodically driven to unite against the onslaught of Turkic and Mongol invaders. (In the

³ 'If it missed you, Aptarauli, / may you long be alive! / If my shot hit you, / may you be my underling': I. Xornauli, *psav-xevsuri p'oezia*, Tbilisi, 1949, p. 154.

case of the Georgian mountain peoples, the endless struggle with their neighbours — autochthonous Ingush, Chechen, Lezghi as well as Tatar — has the same unifying effect.) The hero who fights for the sake of Vladimir of Kiev may come from the remote outpost of Murom (though admittedly the other *bogatyri* of the Kiev cycle are not frontiersmen); the defender of Queen Tamar of Tbilisi almost always does belong to the isolated mountain salients such as Šat'ili. There are substantial differences: the Russian *bogatyř* travels to Kiev and cajoles Vladimir; the Georgian never leaves his gorges, never sees Tamar or Tbilisi. But the cult of the central symbol in an often centrifugal world is a persistent common factor.⁴

Geographical coincidences and differences speak for themselves. The common symbolism of oak and aspen, eagle and crow, the disparity between Russian imagery of steppe and water birds and the Georgian imagery of rocky gorges and pheasants obviously reflect the facts of flora and fauna.

After allowing for external factors, one still needs to observe a critical caution in comparing apparently similar symbols, heroes and situations. We might note, for instance, the importance of the snake as a giver of wisdom in both cultures. Xogais Mindi, the subject of several fine heroic poems, in one fairy-story (*zyap'ari*) drinks snake-blood to escape captivity and finds himself able to understand birds and mammals (cf. the brothers Grimm's *The White Snake* or similar themes in Pliny and Philostratus). The early *bylina* hero Volkh presumably derives his powers from his snake-father. But the use of these powers, rather than their origin, is what concerns us here. We might, for instance, take the lines:

bebersa lašaris žvarsa
xmels gorzed edga ber muxa,
c'vers eba šibi okrosa,
zecas avidis k'ibita . . .⁵

and refer them to the legend of Zurab Eristvišvili and the shrine. Zurab sheds a cat's blood, which is the magic force needed to uproot the oak, break the chain and destroy the shrine's supernatural

⁴ Il'ya Muromets's 'first journey', at the relief of Chernigov, clearly shows the *bogatyř* as an opponent of internecine strife and, in the opening up of the 'straight road', as a protagonist of unity.

⁵ 'At ancient Lašari shrine / on the dry mountain an old oak stood, / a golden chain was tied to its crown, / it reached like a staircase to the sky': M. Čikovani *et al.*, eds, *kartuli xalxuri p'oestia*, 6 vols, Tbilisi, 1972-77 (hereafter *KXP*), I, p. 57.

Transliteration of Georgian verse and titles follows the system of H. Vogt (*Grammaire de la langue géorgienne*, Oslo, 1971) which is self-explanatory, the apostrophe indicating that the preceding consonant is glottalized. The corresponding aspirated consonants are not marked as such. As is usual, dialect texts are not normalized. I have used 'shrine' to translate both *žvari* 'cross' and *xat'i* 'icon', which lose their Christian meaning among the Pshavi, Khevsuri and Tushi.

powers of resistance. Oak, golden chain and cat only too vividly recall Pushkin's 'dub, zlataya tsep', kot uchonyy' (oak, golden chain, trained cat), but the symbols work so differently in the two mythological fields, that comparison can lead us only into the most speculative remotenesses of anthropology. Not only the symbols, but the systems must be comparable.

At the centre of the system is the figure of the monarch. Except for the archaic *byliny*, such as *Svyatogor i grob* or *Volkh Vseslav'yevich*, or the later *byliny*, the greater part are set in the reign of Vladimir, extended back into the past and forward through all the Tatar invasions, so that the historical prince can be said to be attenuated into a legendary demigod. True, his treatment is remarkable, by the standard of any heroic poetry, for the number of human weaknesses he is endowed with. Ill-tempered, vindictive, vacillating, even unpatriotic (to such a degree that his *bogatyri* disown him as a symbol of their nation and faith, and fight on for the princess Apraksya alone), Vladimir is often the comic pole of the *bylina*. But his ubiquitous presence in the *bylina*, his constant identification as *stolne-kiyevskiy* and, above all, the epithet *solnyshko* are indications of his divinity. His weaknesses, his wrath, are divine; for instance, in his anger with Il'ya Muromets:

Запирайте ставни великие,
Замыкайте ставни великие,
Замыкайте дубьямы-колодьямы,
Чтоб оттуль не повышел ведь.⁶

He does not always need his *bogatyri* to protect him. The deadly whistle of Solovey-razboynik, the drunken stamping of Dobrynya knock out Vladimir's nobles, but, with his pine-marten coat and physical resilience, he shows the invulnerability as well as the temper of Zeus.

Queen Tamar is a more conventional ideal, peerless and immaculate. Unlike Vladimir, she is fused with a divinity from whom the historical queen's name, perhaps, derives. The Pshavi hero has no need to travel to Mtskheta or Tbilisi to worship her or swear fidelity: in Pshavia, opposite the shrine of Lašari, stood the shrine of Tamar. In *pšavlebis galaškreba mitxoze* (The Pshavians make war on Mitxo), Tamar aids her people against the Chechens, like a sun-goddess, by preventing the dew from falling:

Nu daik'vexebt pšavlebo
gič'ris lašaris žvaria,

⁶ 'Bolt the great shutters, / lock the great shutters, / lock them with oak blocks, / so that he never gets out of there': B. N. Putilov, ed., *Byliny*, Leningrad, 1957 (hereafter *Byliny*), p. 329.

marcxniva udga k'op'ala,
 maržvniv lašaris žvaria,
 dedak'aci ram mobrzanda,
 stkves, tamar dedopalia,
 zyvasa uknia lečaki,
 ar gadmovides cvaria.⁷

The queen is thus on the level of the demigod,⁸ K'op'ala (one of the servants of the sixty-nine *γvtisšvili* (sons of God) who met his death destroying demons). In other poems she appears leading a blue-grey horse (*lurža*)⁹ shod with gold. In her epitaph, *tamar dedopali viq'av* (I was Queen Tamar),¹⁰ goddess and queen are indistinguishable: she is credited with setting limits on the sea, bringing dry land closer, making demons pay for appanage, exacting tribute from Isfahan, attacking Istanbul and Daruband with the sword. The heroes who serve these god-monarchs themselves have divine attributes. The more archaic the hero, Svyatogor or Volkh Vseslav'yevich on the one hand, K'op'ala or Xogais Mindi on the other, the less human is his birth or death. Volkh is born of woman and snake and the whole earth convulses:

Подрожала сыра земля,
 Стряслося славно царство Индейское,
 А и синее море сколыбалося
 Для-ради рожденья богатырского,
 Молода Вольха Всеславича;
 Рыба пошла в морскую глубину,
 Птица полетела высоко в небеса,
 Туры да олени за горы пошли,¹¹

Just as Volkh's name reminds us of *volkhvy* (sorcerers), so Xogais Mindi appears to echo an annually dying and resurrecting corn-god. Xogais Mindi's death involves the universe:

xogais mindi k'vdeboda
 mze c'itldeboda, cxreboda.
 ca č'exda, mic'a grgvinaṽda, . . .
 kor-šavardeni, arc'ivi

⁷ 'Don't brag, Pshavians, / that the cross (= shrine) of Lašari is with you, / on its left stands K'op'ala, / on the right is Lašari shrine, / the woman that has come, / they said is Queen Tamar, / she has veiled the sea / so that no dew should come': *KXP*, iv, p. 71.

⁸ Demigods, such as Iasxari and K'op'ala, the killers of *devi*, and the semi-literary Promethean figure, Amirani, are more prominent as predecessors of the folk hero in Georgian than in Russian traditions.

⁹ *KXP*, iv, p. 106.

¹⁰ K., p. 144.

¹¹ 'Mother earth shuddered, / the glorious Indian empire quaked, / and the blue sea also rocked / because of the birth of the *bogatyř*, / young Vol'kh Vseslav'yevich; / fish went into the depths of the sea, / birds flew high into the skies, / ibex and deer crossed the mountains': *Byliny*, p. 43.

su mxrebit ixošeboda.
maylis č'iuxis nadiri
sat'irlad emzadeboda . . .¹²

The more archaic hero not only moves nature with his departure; he also chooses his death and turns it into a ritual which is, in some cases, itself a token of resurrection to come. The death of a *bogatyř*' is rarely treated in Russian folk poetry, but Svyatogor's death is extraordinarily elaborate. He climbs into the coffin of his own will, asking Il'ya Muromets to put the lid over him. He makes no immediate effort to escape, only asking Il'ya to use his strength and Svyatogor's sword to free him. Although the iron hoops that clamp the coffin-lid and Il'ya's final refusal to breathe in Svyatogor's magic strength seem to contradict this ritual self-immolation, Svyatogor accepts his end, asking only that his horse die with him. Xogais Mindi is a warrior of Arxot'i, a rocky salient of Khevsuri territory on the north flank of the Caucasus, stranded in Chechen lands and renowned for its fighting men. Mindi's expedition is lured into a Chechen fort by the women, who then summon an army to despatch the Khevsuri. The Chechen give Mindi, their most mortal blood-feud enemy, his sword back, so that he may fight them to the death:

tormet'i mok'la mindima,
dadga, čaago qmalia.
ar daižeres 3aylebma,
yabaqad dadges mk'vdaria.¹³

The code of the Khevsuri forbids the hero to kill more than twelve of his enemy: Mindi accepts his death.¹⁴

The later Russian folk heroes, however, are at their greatest not in their death, but in the Herculean tasks imposed on them. The forces that they have to overcome can be seen both as mythical symbols of evil and as real enemies of their nation. The Robber-Nightingale that Il'ya Muromets captures and then destroys can be understood as a malevolent force of nature or simply as a nest of bandits. In Khevsuri folk poetry the symbolism is similar, but the ambivalence less sustained. The story of the expulsion of the Chechens from Šat'ili after they had settled there is only thinly disguised under the image of a bird:

¹² 'Xogais Mindi was dying, / the sun went red, waned, / the sky thundered, the earth rumbled . . . / hawk and peregrine, eagle / fell wings and all (from the sky). / The game on the high bare crags / prepared to weep . . .': *KXP*, iv, p. 33 (no. 3).

¹³ 'Mindi killed twelve, / he stood still, threw down the sword. / The dogs (= Chechens) didn't hesitate, / they felled the dead man with a salvo': *KXP*, iv, p. 32 (no. 2).

¹⁴ For a fuller account of Xogais Mindi's life and death, see Elene Virsalaze's outstanding collection (in Russian translation), *Gruzinskiye narodnyye predaniya i legendy*, Moscow, 1973, pp. 111-17.

šat'ils gadidda xoxobi,
guldidad dažda žarzeda,
dazarda švidi c'ic'ili
arc'ivis nabudarzeda.¹⁵

Thereafter the poem becomes a straightforward account of the Pshavi hero's killing the seven chicks and rescuing his future bride.

The figure of the nightingale or the pheasant appears to be otherwise unsupported in both cultures. Evil usually takes a more conventional personification. In the *bylina* the snake soon loses the magical aura that it possessed as the father of Volkh and becomes an attribute of the hated foe who creeps in as a guest of the court, to be challenged and expelled by the *bogatyř* (Alyosha Popovich for instance). But in both Russian and Georgian folk poetry, the snake is also the abductor of a woman whom the hero has to rescue. In *Dobrynya i zmey*, true, the *bogatyř* reacts with a perversity typical of the Russian epic hero. Having defeated the snake once, he undertakes Vladimir's commission to capture his favourite niece from the snake with drunken resentment, and succeeds without the least gallantry.

Решил-то всё он змеиною помещицо.
Поехал он домой да ко девице,
Брал-то он ведь красную девицу
На добра коня, он повез-то ю,
Повез-то он во стольный во Киев-град,
Не ранену привез да не кровавлену.¹⁶

In an Achara song, the unhappy bride complains to her uncle that her husband is a man by day and a snake (*gvelešap'i*, the snake-monster) by night. The uncle 'arose, saddled his horse, put on his armour, belted a sword to his waist, tightened the saddle, got on his horse, came to her aid and helped her out',¹⁷ so that the snake is swallowed up by the earth.

Killing the monster — nightingale, pheasant chicks or snake — and rescuing the girl is achieved not merely by prowess, but by magical powers. Less and less emphasis is placed on the supernatural in the later heroic poetry, Russian or Georgian; nevertheless Dobrynya is able to kill the snake after two days and nights of continuous fighting only when he remembers the magic presents he has been given by his mother, the cloth to wipe his shoulder, the whip to beat his horse and the silken lash to hack the snake to bits. The

¹⁵ 'A pheasant bred at Šat'ili, / settled there carefree and openly, / raised seven chicks / on what had been an eagle's nest': K., p. 126.

¹⁶ 'He had put an end to the whole domain of snakes. / He went home and to the girl, / he had in fact taken the beautiful girl / onto his good horse, he took her, / he took her to Kiev the capital city, / he brought her unwounded and unblooded': *Byliny*, p. 111.

¹⁷ КХР, II, p. 92.

Khevsuri hero Toryva is said to have been given 'floating armour' (*mcuravi žaš'vi*) by the wife of a sorcerer, so that wherever he is struck the armour moves round to absorb the arrow or sword-blow.¹⁸

Among the Pshavi and Khevsuri, however, the snake is a symbol of ruin and death which no hero can overcome. In one of the finest heroic lyrics, it is the earthly counterpart of the raven:

zen bacaligos tovoli tovs,
kven bacaligos šrebaos . . .
tinibek, šensa cixesa
maržvena k'utxe hskdebaos,
tavs šemomždara q'orani,
liboš'i gveli žvrebao.
šiga c'evs aludauri,
k'vdeba, avara rčebao;
gverds uzis coli lamazi,
santelivita dnebaos . . .¹⁹

Like so much Georgian heroic poetry, it focuses on the hero's death, rather than his exploits. Structural and other poetic questions apart, this would appear to be the most substantial difference between the Russian and Georgian folk traditions. But although the death of the *bogatyř* is one of the less common themes, it is nevertheless important. The essential pathos and interest of the *bylina* to its singer and audience lies in the distance and difference of its subject matter and times from the present: the *bogatyři*, their supernatural powers and Kievan Russia are extinct; that they are dead is as relevant as that they once lived. The accent on adventure and dramatic conflict, rather than on lyrical pathos, may overshadow the fact of death, but when death is the theme of the *bylina*, it is by no means an anomaly. In *Smert' Vasiliya Buslayeva*, the same recklessness that carried Vasily through life causes his death:

И в том-то подпись подписана:
«А кто-де у камня станет тешиться,
А и тешиться-забавляться,
Вдоль скакать по камню, —
Сломить будет буйну голову».
Василий тому не верует,
Стал со дружиною тешиться и забавляться,
Поперек камню поскакивати;
Захотелось Василью вдоль скакать,

¹⁸ К., p. 371.

¹⁹ 'In upper Bacaligo it is snowing, / in lower Bacaligo it is dry . . . / Tinibek, your fort's / right-hand corner is crumbling, / a raven has perched on top, / a snake is burrowing in the foundations. / Inside lies Aludauri, / he is dying, he stays no more, / his beautiful wife sits beside him, / melting like a candle': KXP, IV, p. 245.

Разбежался, скочил вдоль по камению
И не доскочил только четверти,
И тут убили под камнем.²⁰

Still more significant, perhaps, is the legendary end of the 'friends, brothers, comrades' in those versions of *Kamskoye poboishche* in which the Tatar hordes multiply like a hydra as the *bogatyri* hack them down; the *bogatyri* realize that they, 'the living, cannot win a fight with the dead' and are literally petrified. Soviet scholars, such as Propp,²¹ regard this end as unauthentic, since it contradicts the buoyant optimism of the *byliny* and for other reasons which I have not understood. Admittedly, at least the title of the *bylina* that ends in this way, 'How the bogatyrs became extinct (*perevelis*)' is not authentic, but the nineteenth-century views of Miller and Veselovsky seem uncontroverted: bourgeois folklore, like bourgeois physics, must be allowed some measure of achievement.

The Georgian heroes are harder to distinguish from each other; instead of one *druzhina*, they form an almost endless chain, for the same names — Mindia, Berdia, Aluda, Toryva — and surnames are handed on from generation to generation, from prehistory to the present day. Only in the early years of this century did the heroic wars end in the mountains, and the attitudes persist. All the same, the idea of the collective extermination of the *k'ai q'ma* (literally: *dobryy molodets*) is utterly final in poems such as *narčevi važebis čaqoca* (The slaughter of the chosen):

sik'vdilm tkva: 'ar davižereb,
nabžanebs vikam xtisasa,
satavit čamavxq'vebodi,
bolos gamaval c'q'lisasa,
čavxqocdi arxot'ivnebsa, . . .²²

A list of the victims follows: Aludauri, Mindia, Ušiša, Berdia, Totia, etc., with the attributes and totem symbols (wolf, eagle, leopard)

²⁰ 'And in it is an inscription: / "And whoever starts making fun near the stone, / making fun or amusing himself, / jumping the length of the stone, / — will break his turbulent head." Vasily doesn't believe it, / he began making fun and amusing himself with his band, / taking jumps across the stone; / Vasily felt like jumping the length, / he took a running jump, jumped the length of the stone / and didn't even manage a quarter of it, / and there and then was killed beneath the stone': *Byliny*, p. 374.

The fatal leap to a rock is a characteristic climax in Georgian and Svanetian mythology and folk poetry. Betken, the human lover of Dali (the hunting goddess of the Svans), like Actaeon by Diana, is put to death by the angered goddess. He is lured by a golden ibex on to a rock from which the only escape is a deadly leap. Other heroes, some of recent memory, pursue an ibex on to a crag from which they cannot return. See K., p. 90, *ǰarǰi*.

²¹ V. Ya. Propp, *Russkij geroičeskij epos*, Leningrad, 1955, pp. 326–28.

²² 'Death said, "I won't put it off, / I'll do God's command, / I shall have followed / the stream from the source to the end, / I shall have slaughtered the men of Arxot'i." . . .': *KXP*, iv, p. 35.

that are linked with their names throughout Georgian heroic poetry. Like the death of the *bogatyr*, whose petrification suggests that they will resurrect in some future crisis, the death of the Khevsuri heroes is also a metamorphosis:

sik'vdilm tkva: 'sulet žars davsxam
narčevs važebisasa,
c'initi čxut'sa čamudgam,
k'ošs čamurige b rvlisasa.²³

Unlike Russian heroic poetry, where the overtones of Christian after-life are no stronger than the undertones of the pagan underworld, Georgian poetry is underpinned by a belief in *suleti* or *šaveti*, Elysium or Hades. In the afterworld the hero lives on, bathed in the pale light of the setting sun; crossing the treacherous rope-bridge that leads to the *suleti*, the coward is cast into pitch. Belief in an after-life does not lessen the horror of death; it gives it more poetic and didactic force. Georgian heroic poetry teaches its audience not to fear death; Russian heroic poetry — not to fear life or death. The Russian *bogatyr* is frequently given the choice of three roads: the road to wealth, the road to beautiful women, or the road of duty that leads to Kiev and possibly death. He chooses the third. A likewise ascetic moral is drawn in Georgian poetry, but with bitter-sweet irony:

važk'acsa tavis sik'vdili
tavi mžinare hgonia,
sisxliša γvari nadeni
salxino opli hgonia,
gak'roba sak'acezeda,
cxenze šeždoma hgonia, . . .²⁴

Such passages in heroic poetry illuminate its entire ethos: not only to move and entertain, but to teach. The extraordinary characteristic of Georgian heroic poetry is that it is closely associated with the invocation of the souls of the dead, a service through poetry analogous to the sacrifice of oxen at the shrine of Lašari, Xaxmat'i or Gudani, for the sake of the dead heroes who were vassals (*q'mebi*) of these shrines.

Ethnological descriptions, such as Važa-pšavela's essays *apxušooba* (The festival of Apxušo) and *xalaržoba da rigebi* (Commemoration of

²³ 'Death said, "I shall send down to Elysium an army / of chosen men, / I shall put before them a cask (of ale), / I shall pass them round a brass bowl (for ale)."' : *KXP*. iv, p. 36.

²⁴ To a man his own death / seems like sleep itself, / the torrent of blood that has flowed / seems like the sweat of delight, / being stretched out on a litter / seems like mounting a horse . . . : K. Sixaruli, *xalxuri sibzne*, vol. iv, Tbilisi, 1965, p. 167.

the dead and the rites) of the late 1880s²⁵ show that poetry and invocation are more than concomitant. At the *apxušoba* bullocks and sheep wait for slaughter at the shrine, while the men sing the commemorative poem (*mosagonari*), *tkveni č'irime q'ornebo* (I beg you, ravens) in which the dead hero ironically hands his body to the carrion-eaters. Dancing, beer-drinking and feasting follow, with the frequent interjection 'God have mercy on *yač'auri*', followed by the narration of the life and death of *yač'auri*. A shooting contest follows, and then a song which deserves quoting if only to show that the poetry of the living is meant to supplement the communion of the living and the dead:

me umyerali ver gavsžleb,
suli šamindev mk'vdrisao.
p'ursa sč'amen da yvinos smen
simyeras ar it'q'viano.²⁶

The rites of *xalaržoba* are not restricted to any one feast day. They commemorate the dead man forty days and a year after his death. Here too feasting and grief are linked with poetry and song. Men and horses go to the cemetery with offerings and *šendobas eubneba* (say grace, ask forgiveness) with commemorative heroic poetry.

Such care is called for because the dead in *suleti* have only the most precarious existence, whose tolerability depends on the invocations, sacrifices and grace of the living. The mythological poem *suletiš leksi* makes this clear:

q'ovel bednier dyeebši
sak'lavebs moeliano.
visac momxseni ara hq'avt,
p'iruk'uym dasxdebiano,
vinc imat moixseniebs,
sulitac cxondebiano.²⁷

The half-pagan, half-Christian rites of *sulis xucoba* (ritual of the soul) and *žvaris xucoba* (ritual of the shrine, or cross) not only invoke blessing and dedicate sacrificial food and drink (the *t'abla*) to the souls of dead heroes, but coincide with *xat'oba*, the day of the shrine, when heroic poetry and feasting coincide. Folk poets themselves do not speak directly of the purpose of their poetry, but we can regard

²⁵ Važa-pšavela, *šromebi*, vol. VII: *etnografia*, Tbilisi, 1956, pp. 34, 71 ff.

²⁶ 'I cannot withstand without songs, / say me grace for the soul of a dead man. / They eat bread and drink wine, / they will not utter a song.'

²⁷ 'On all fortunate days / they await sacrificial beasts. / Whoever has no-one to remember him / sits at table with his face turned away; / who remembers them, / (by him) they are blessed in spirit': *KXP*, II, p. 64.

the words of Važa-pšavela in the poem *gvelis mč'ameli* (The snake-eater) of 1901 as being the statement not only of a great poet and outstanding ethnologist, but of an authentic Pshavi:

msmenelta gr3nobas udebden
sagmiro ambebs xidada . . .
. . . ganmart'avdian mat ambavs,
šandoba tkvian gmirtada.²⁸

(lines 7–8, 13–14)

Poetry, like the reaping of the corn, is sanctioned so that

mk'vdart k'acta šandoba vutxrat,
galni vaxsenot cierni²⁹

(lines 254–55)

The service of the dead extended among the Khevsuri and some northern Caucasian tribes to sacrificing captive enemies to the souls of men they had killed, not merely to pay 'blood price' like Achilles's slaughter of twelve Trojans on the pyre of Patroclus, but specifically so that the sacrificial victim 'might draw them water and lace their sandals'.³⁰ Heroic poetry can go further than lament; it can be part of a system of support for the unhappy dead who, even in Elysium, are considered by their surviving kinsmen to be the *uk'loni*, the deprived. The dead appeal to the living in such poems as the *mosagonari*, *čemta survilta saz'yvari* (The limit of my desires):

q'velasgan vitxov šendobas,
čemo samšoblo kveq'anav . . .
. . . dedis 3mebisa sicocxles,
upaltan imat vedrebas.³¹

Naturally, in common with the *bylina*, the Georgian poem has more concrete, if no more immediate, aims. One of them is to put an end to internecine war and unite against the Moslem or pagan foe. The *bylina* appeals indirectly, by proclaiming Rus' and Kiev as ideals greater than Chernigov or Pskov, by exhorting the ruler not to treat with the enemy; Georgian heroic poetry often appeals directly, in the style of the Russian chronicles:

tušno, pšavelno, qevsurno,
laškari šavaziarot,
ertmanets nu uyalat'ebt,
mt'eri k'i davazianot.³²

²⁸ 'They aroused listeners' feelings / as a bridge to heroic tales . . . / they related stories to them, / they invoked grace on the heroes.'

²⁹ 'We should say grace for dead men, / invoke the heavenly powers.'

³⁰ See T. Saxok'ia, *kartuli xat'ovani sit'q'vatkmani*, vol. III, Tbilisi, 1955, p. 239b.

³¹ 'I ask for grace from everyone, / o my native land. / For the life of my mother's brothers, / for them to beseech the Lord': *KXP*, v, p. 749.

³² 'Tushi, Pshavi, Khevsuri, / let us form a common army, / do not betray one another, / let it be the enemy that we strike': *KXP*, III, p. 82.

Similarly, one of the underlying themes in Il'ya Muromets's destruction of the Robber-Nightingale is to open up the road and link up the city states with the centre again.

II

Thus comparable aims are fulfilled by very different means, means so different that no worthwhile contrast can be drawn in a short survey such as this. Suffice it to say that the Georgian heroic poem is usually fragmentary — one incident, very often the last fatality in the life of the hero or of his *mziri*, his expeditionary band. There is often no introduction, invocation or conclusion; the plot is discrete, with many lapses. Narration changes abruptly from third to second to first person. There are few of the sequences of triads, e.g. the three noises — *posvist*, *pokrik*, *poship* — of Solovey-razboynik, or the three presents to Dobrynya from his mother and their threefold occurrence, which go to make the *bylina* so satisfactory in structure. Georgian folk poetry shows less dynamism than the *bylina*'s free rhythm and contrapuntal singing or alliteration. The eight-syllable Georgian folk metre depends exclusively on variation in the number of words for contrast in speed and rhythm;³³ with its extended inflectional rhyming of alternate lines, it is largely incantatory and sonorous.

The imagery of the *bylina* and *sagmiro leksi* likewise functions differently. Without the regularly recurrent episodes and images of the *bylina*, Georgian folk poetry cannot spin such extended symbolic threads. Only in later poems, such as the nineteenth-century *arsenas leksi*, is there a sustained narrative and dramatic thread linking the hero's exploits with his work and his death. The points of comparison between Georgian and Russian folk poetry are easier to find if we take the Russian lyric and ballad. K'ot'et'išvili,³⁴ for instance, points out the parallels between the hero's dream in the ballad, *Okh ty mat' moya rodnaya*³⁵ and the Georgian 'ballad', or *xmit nat'irali* (loud weeping), likewise a dialogue, *c'uxeli sizmari vnaxe* (Last night I had a dream). Both ballads alternate the symbols that the youth has dreamt with the doom-laden interpretations that his mother offers him. In the Russian ballad, the empty room augurs exile, the broken beams augur the disintegration of the family. In the Georgian ballad, the

³³ See G. Šetek'auri, 'alit'eracia xalxur leksebsi' in *kartuli polk'lori*, vol. vi, Tbilisi, 1976, pp. 19–31. The alternate rhymes and fixed octosyllabic line of Georgian poetry, it is arguable, give a less pliable framework than the freer blank verse of the *bylina*, so that the reciter is less able to improvise and, at the same time, is less dependent on a strong plot structure in order to retain and recall the verse.

³⁴ K., pp. 282, 413.

³⁵ F. I. Buslayev, *Russkaya narodnaya poeziya*, St Petersburg, 1887, p. 42.

youth dreams of a fallen poplar, broken branches, fallen vine-leaves — a total of eighteen symbols — which his mother relentlessly interprets as his dead body, crushed limbs, fallen locks of hair, family and grave.

It is the Russian ballad, concentrating on the hero's predestination and doom, that is closest to the Georgian heroic idea. The Don Cossack *Staryy oryol* offers a contrast of eagle, the heroic predator and raven, the carrion-eating enemy:

Прилетали ко сизу орлу три черных ворона,
 Прилетали к нему и в глаза глядят ему,
 Во глаза-то глядят, ему речи говорят:
 «Полно, полно тебе, стар сизой орел,
 По крутым горам летать, гусей-лебедей бивать!»
 — «Ах, кабы были мои прежние залетные крылышки,
 Мои крылья резвые, когти острые!
 Догнал бы я вас всех, трех воронов,
 И избил бы я вас вплоть до бела тела!»
 Начали молодца три черных ворона клевать
 И ретивое его сердце вынимать.
 «Ах вы братья-товарищи, где вы подевались?
 Или вы по крутым горам разлетались?»³⁶

Važa-pšavela's ten-line *arc'ivi* (the eagle) is extraordinarily close. (I make no apology for treating Važa-pšavela as an authentic folk poet; in any case he expresses a frequent folk contrast of eagle and raven with great succinctness.)

arc'ivi vnaxe dač'rili
 q'vav-q'ornebs eomebobda,
 ec'ada bečavs adgoma,
 magram veyara dgeboda,
 cals mxars mic'aze miitrevs,
 gulisp'irs sixxli scxeboda.
 vah, dedas tkvensa, q'ovebo,
 cud dros čagigdavt xelada,
 toro vnaxavdi tkvens bumbuls
 gašlils, gapant'uls velada.³⁷

³⁶ 'Three black crows flew to the grey-blue eagle, / flew to him and look him in the eyes, / look him in the eyes, say things to him: / "That's enough from you, old grey eagle, / flying over the steep mountains, killing geese and swans!" / — "Oh, if only I had my former far-flying wings, / my lively wings, sharp talons! / I'd catch you all up, three crows, / and smash you to the white of your bodies!" / The three black crows began pecking at the warrior / and taking out his restless heart. / "Oh, my brothers and comrades, where have you vanished to? / Or have you scattered over the steep mountains?"': A. M. Astakhova, D. M. Balashova, eds, *Narodnyye ballady*, Moscow-Leningrad, 1963, p. 255.

³⁷ 'I saw a wounded eagle, / it was fighting with crows and ravens, / the wretch tried to rise, / but could no longer stand, / it drags one wing on the ground, / blood was daubed on its chest. / Alas, damn your mother, crows, / you have attacked me at a bad time, /

The image of eagle beset by crows, so widespread in both cultures, typifies an attitude to the enemy that does not admit him any equality or give him any quarter. To the *bogatyr*' and to the Georgian *k'ai q'ma*, the Tatar is an enemy against whom all ruses and violences are permissible. Only in the Georgian culture, however, do we meet exceptions. Certain laws transcend even blood-feud, one being the priority of hospitality. In the ballad *šemomeq'ara q'ivčayi* (I came across a Kipchak [Tatar]),⁸⁸ the hero offers his enemy bread, pheasant meat and wine, attacking only when his ill-bred guest kisses his wife and the wife cries out, 'Woe to the wife of a cowardly man (*cudis q'misasa*)'. There are incidents, as we have seen, in the struggles with the Chechen and Ingush, where fighting has gone on so long that it is ritualized and the enemy is chivalrous enough, for example, to give Xogais Mindi his sword, so that he may kill twelve more of them. Above all, in the hunting lyrics and ballads an extraordinary respect is accorded to the quarry, whether it is food, like the ibex, or predator, like the panther. One of the most moving of Georgian folk poems, *leksi vepxvisa da moq'misa* (The poem of the youth and the panther), tells how both hunter and panther perish in the fight, how the youth's mother dreams of both her son and the animal, and in her grief decides:

ikneba vepvxis dedai
 čemze mc'areda st'irisa,
 c'avide, mec ik mivide,
 samžimar utxra č'irisa,
 isic mit ambobs ambebsa,
 mec utxra čemis švilisa,

else I'd have seen your downy feathers / scattered, spread over the fields': Važa-pšavela, *rčeli*, Tbilisi, 1959, p. 52. The poem is dated 1887; the Russian ballad, *Staryj orjol*, was first published in 1885, but influence seems an unlikely hypothesis. Readers who have qualms about Važa-pšavela's acceptability as a folk poet are referred to his sources, folk aphorisms such as:

arc'ivo mxark'veriano,
 q'ornebs rad azlev zavsao?
 mindors ro mok'vdes k'ai q'ma,
 c'in c'in eg dastxris tvaltao.

(Eagle with white-spotted wings, / why do you leave the ravens in peace? Should a brave young warrior die in the field, / first of all (the raven) will gouge out his eyes.)
 or:

vah, dedašensa, q'orano,
 čemi lšita sžyebode:
 ibanebode sisxlita,
 mayal xezeda sždebode.
 ertxel k'i ise gagazheb,
 pexze veyara sdgebode.

(Alas, damn your mother, raven / that you should gorge on my corpse, / that you should be washed in blood, / sit on a high tree. / For once I shall give you such a feast / that you won't be able to stand any more on your feet.): *KXP*, III, p. 112.

⁸⁸ A. Gomiašvili, ed., *moq'me da vepxvi*, Tbilisi, 1964, p. 53.

imasac brali eknebis
uc'q'alod xmlit dač'rilisa.³⁹

Such respect, however, is rarely accorded to the enemy and does not diminish the ruthlessness of the struggle which we sense in both Russian and Georgian epic. Once that struggle is over, with the repulsion of the Tatars in Russia and the coming of the Russians into the plains and valleys of Georgia, the heroic ethos evaporates. In the mountains among the Khevsuri it still lives on, but by the mid-nineteenth century there was no more room for the *k'ai q'ma* in Georgia than for the *bogatyř* in Muscovy.

In one of the most extended and recent Georgian poems, *arsenas leksi* (The poem of Arsena),⁴⁰ Arsena is loved by the people of Mtskheta not as a national warrior but as an outlaw whose exploits win their admiration. Arsena's last robbery, when he demands a man's purse or his horse because the victim refuses to drink with him on Good Friday, ends with his defeat and death. But, although he is granted the epitaph of a *k'ai k'aci* (a good man), he is stripped of the tragic and legendary qualities of the mountain heroes. Correspondingly, the poet who praises the killer of the Tatar Qara-Namazi in the poem of that name looks at the exploit with a casual levity quite unlike the traditional heroic dedication:

q'ara-namazis mamk'vlelsa
rad ar gačleven žvarsao?
eg ro mack'la q'rol russa,
gaxdidnen apicarsao.⁴¹

In Russian folk poetry the change in ethos is remarkably similar. The term *dobryy molodets* in Russian lyrics no longer applies to the epic hero; it is now the bandit in the *udalaya pesnya*,⁴² thinking his last thoughts before the gallows claim him. All that he has in common with the *bogatyř* are the appellation *dobryy molodets*, his pride in knowing how to answer for himself before the tsar and the accoutrements of Il'ya Muromets — the good horse, taut bow and tempered arrows. One might tentatively conclude that the heroic ethos is a universal response to extreme tribal or national tribulation and that once the *bogatyř* or *k'ai q'ma* is extinct, he cannot be reinvented.

³⁹ 'Perhaps the panther's mother / is weeping bitterly because of me, / I shall leave, I shall go to her, / give her condolence for her grief, / while she tells me her story, / I shall tell her of my son, / she must feel sorrow for her son, / pitilessly cut down by the sword': K., p. 104.

⁴⁰ M. T'orošeliže (intr.), *arsenas leksi*, Tbilisi, 1965.

⁴¹ 'Why don't they give a cross / to you, Qara-Namazi's killer? / If a stinking Russian had killed him, / they'd have made him an officer': K., p. 227.

⁴² V. Ya. Propp, ed., *Narodnyye liricheskiye pesni*, Leningrad, 1961, p. 425.